

THE DATE OF THE DUMBARTON OAKS EPIPHANY MEDALLION

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SOME seven years ago Mr. Marvin C. Ross and myself, unknown to each other, were studying independently two groups of objects which had formed part of the great Kyrenia (Lamboussa) treasure. The publication of my paper on the medallions and coins of the girdle¹ preceded by a few months his penetrating study² of the splendid Epiphany medallion, once in the Strzygowski collection and now at Dumbarton Oaks, and he was able to make use of my conclusions in a final paragraph. The following notes represent no more than a postscript to his article, and deal mainly with the denomination and date of the medallion.

Mr. Ross is surely correct in his view that the medallion was not the work of an ordinary goldsmith, but was struck at the mint of Constantinople. Its technique and general appearance are very close to those of the consular medallions from the girdle, and though the letter forms are often different, we know from the coins that the mint was accustomed to considerable variety in this respect. Mr. Ross's observation that the treatment of the eyes and other details indicate that the dies for the obverse and reverse were prepared by different artists is borne out by the coinage, for the clumsy head and eyes of Christ in the baptismal scene³ are exactly

like those of decanumnia of the reign of Maurice, while the treatment of the faces in the Nativity scene is closer to that of the gold.

In view of the official origin of the medallion it may be assumed that its weight was related to those of the solidus and the gold pound. The figure cannot be ascertained directly because of the presence of the mount, which brings the total weight up to 109 g., but there is good reason to believe that it was a piece of 12 solidi. This was a denomination very rarely struck, but the dimensions of the twelve-solidus medallion of Severus III (461-5) which came to light some years ago are identical with those of the Dumbarton Oaks piece.⁴ Certainly the latter is too large to be either a six- or a nine-solidus medallion,⁵ and though no eighteen-solidus medallion is known, the total weight of the Dumbarton Oaks specimen puts such a denomination out of the question.

There is one important consideration which bears upon the date. Mr. Ross argued that the piece was made in the late sixth century, but he did not feel inclined to go further than to specify the period covered by the reigns of Justin II (565-78) and Tiberius II (578-82) and the early years of that of Maurice.⁶ In view of what we know or can infer regarding the girdle, we can, I think, limit it to the last of these periods. That the girdle and the

¹ "The Kyrenia Girdle of Byzantine Medallions and Solidi," *Numismatic Chronicle*, 6th ser., XV (1955), 55-70.

² "A Byzantine Gold Medallion at Dumbarton Oaks," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, 11 (1957), 247-61.

³ Dr. Hans Belting has pointed out to me the close similarity between the figure of Christ on the medallion and that in the seventh-century (?) representation of the baptism in Chapel XVII of the monastery of Baouît (J. Clédât, *Le monastère et la nécropole de Baouît*, Mémoires publiés par les membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale au Caire, XII (Cairo, [1904], pl. 45). The figure of Christ, depicted with long hair and beard but of miniature dimensions, stands in the same attitude, and the gestures of St. John and of the angel nearest Christ—the fresco, perhaps for reasons of space, shows only

one angel—are virtually identical. The representations evidently spring from the same iconographical tradition.

⁴ It was published by Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee, "Two New Gold Medallions of the Later Roman Empire," *Num. Chron.*, 5th ser., XX (1940), 9-23. It is reproduced in her *Roman Medallions* (Numismatic Studies, no. 5. New York, 1944), pl. 30. 3.

⁵ The diameter is *ca.* 50 mm., while that of the six-solidus medallions in the girdle is *ca.* 40 mm. and that of a nine-solidus medallion of the 4th century—no later specimens are known—was *ca.* 45 mm.

⁶ Pp. 252-3. Strzygowski, who first published the medallion, placed it simply in the sixth or seventh century (*Altai-Iran und Völkerwanderung* [Leipzig, 1917], pp. 44-5).

medallion originally belonged to the same individual seems to me evident: they were found together, their style and fabric show them to be very close to one another in date, they are the kind of object which only a very high official would be likely to possess, and they have been mounted as jewellery in almost exactly the same fashion.⁷ The coins and medallions in the girdle, however, show that the owner rose to very high rank only after Maurice's accession. Though many of the earlier coins are rarities, none of them are consular—the consular coins of Tiberius II are conspicuously absent—and they stand in the sharpest contrast to the extraordinary display of consular coins and medallions of Maurice.⁸ What is true of the consular medallions would be even more true of the Epiphany medallion, and we need not, therefore, hesitate to ascribe this to the reign of Maurice.

With regard to the occasion on which the medallion was struck, Mr. Ross notes that while one side is devoted to the Nativity and related scenes, the other shows the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan, so that the essential function of the piece is the celebration of the Epiphany.⁹ His suggestion is that it was produced for presentation to high officials on the occasion of this festival.¹⁰ It may be doubted whether such an explanation is in itself sufficient to account for so remarkable a piece. Epiphany is a religious festival that occurs every year; the medallion is unique. Gold objects of such value have only a slender chance of escaping the crucible, but consular medallions have survived in fair quantity, and if medallions like the one at Dumbarton Oaks had been distributed every year one would expect more to be known. Was there no occasion on which the annual celebration of the Epiphany coincided with some less frequently repeated festivity which closely and directly touched the imperial office and the court?

⁷ There are small differences in the arrangement of the beading and the braid-like inner border, but the frames of both are similarly set at an angle so that their structure and cross-section are identical, and nobody who has handled the two objects can doubt that the mounting was done by the same goldsmith.

⁸ See my article, pp. 67–8.

⁹ Ross, *art. cit.*, pp. 251–2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

Less than a year after the accession of Maurice there occurred, for the first time in nearly two centuries, the birth of a *Porphyrogenitus*. The empresses of the fifth and sixth centuries had been singularly unsuccessful in the performance of their duty of providing heirs to the throne. Between the birth of Theodosius II, son of Arcadius, on 10 April 401 and that of Theodosius, son of Maurice, on 4 August 583¹¹ no son had been born to a reigning emperor. Dynastic succession of a sort had been achieved by the promotion of a nephew or the marriage of a suitable candidate to the daughter or the widow of an emperor; there had been no case of the direct transmission of authority from father to son. Maurice's own experience was to prove no exception to the rule of ill-luck, but in 583 the murder of Maurice and his five sons by the tyrant Phocas was hidden in the future. In the meantime there was an heir to the throne, and Maurice's realization of the significance of his wife's achievement can be seen from the name he bestowed on the boy, for "Theodosius" meant not only the "gift of God" but recalled, and was intended to recall, the second Theodosius, son of Arcadius.¹² Like this prince, the boy was quickly promoted to imperial rank, being crowned Augustus by the Patriarch John on Easter Day, 26 March 590.¹³

None of our sources gives the date of the young Theodosius' baptism, but it is possible to deduce it from what we know of the practice of the Church at that time. It was still customary for the ceremony to be restricted to one of the three great festivals of the year, Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany.¹⁴

¹¹ John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, III. v. 14 (tr. R. Payne Smith [Oxford, 1860], p. 351). The year is given as 585 by Theophanes (A.M. 6077; ed. C. De Boor [Leipzig, 1883], 254), but John was writing at the time and his circumstantial statement that almost immediately after the coronation festivities of Maurice the Empress was found to be with child is one that carries conviction.

¹² John of Ephesus, *loc. cit.*

¹³ Theophanes, A.M. 6082 (p. 267). It seems more reasonable to emend Theophanes' statement of the child's age from 4 ½ to 6 ½ than to assume an error in the year.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orat.* XL, "In sanctum baptismum," 24 (Migne, PG, XXXVI, 392). Cf. Smith and Cheetham, *Dict. christ. antiq.*, s.v. "Baptism," p. 165, § 70.

The last, which commemorated the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan, was obviously the most suitable of the three. Severian of Gabala, the eloquent intriguer who secured the deposition of St. John Chrysostom, wrote a treatise on baptism at Epiphany,¹⁵ and the preference for this festival lasted until well into the middle ages, at least in imperial circles, for in the early tenth century Constantine Porphyrogenitus, born in 905, had his baptism postponed till 6 January 906.¹⁶ It is highly probable that Theodosius II was baptized on this day, despite the fact that he was born nine months before and Pentecost had come in between,¹⁷ and there can be no doubt at all that the son of Maurice, who was born in

August 583, would have been baptized on the Feast of the Epiphany 584.¹⁸

In view of this fact, and of the dating, on other grounds, of the medallion to the reign of Maurice, it seems to me that we are justified in believing that it was one of a small group made for presentation to high officials on the occasion of Theodosius' baptism on 6 January 584.¹⁹ The iconography, as Mr. Ross has pointed out, is not purely religious, but has "imperial" overtones, and this latter aspect must obviously assume greater importance in view of the connection with the birth and baptism of an heir to the throne. Just as the manner in which the imperial authority, exercised in due order and measure, was thought to reproduce the harmonious ordering of the universe by its Creator,²⁰ and the emperor himself in court ceremonies played a role in many respects analogous to that of Christ, so the great events of the ruler's life were held to be prefigured by those of the life of the Saviour. It is with this in mind that we must interpret the iconography of the medallion.

The main design shows the seated figure of the Virgin with the Christ Child on her lap, flanked by two archangels bearing staffs and with their hands raised in adoration. This is a common scene in sacred art, and there is a very interesting parallel between it and one represented on a medallion of the Empress Fausta, the second wife of Constantine the

¹⁵ Gennadius, *De script. ecclesiasticis*, 20 (Migne, PL, LVIII, 1073): *Legi eius* [i.e. Severiani] ... *de baptismo et Epiphaniae solemnitate libellum gratissimum*. None of the various lost homilies of Severian which modern scholars have identified amongst the spurious works of Chrysostom seem to correspond to the work known to Gennadius; see J. Zellinger, *Studien zu Severian von Gabala*, Münstersche Beiträge, 8 (Münster, 1926), and B. Marx, "Severiana unter den Spuria Chrysostomi bei Montfaucon-Migne," *Orientalia christiana periodica*, V (1939), 281-367, esp. pp. 344-6.

¹⁶ *Contin. Theoph.*, VI, 23 (Bonn ed., p. 370); Pseudo-Symeon, "Leo VI," 17 (Bonn ed., pp. 708-9). The years given by the latter are not trustworthy, but its other dates can be relied on.—The practice of the modern Orthodox Church of not conducting baptisms between Christmas and Epiphany is a survival of the ancient practice of limiting them to the great festivals.

¹⁷ We can infer from Mark's *Life of Porphyry* (chap. 52) that the baptism took place in the winter, and the Epiphany would have been the only suitable occasion. Moreover Theodosius II was proclaimed Augustus on 10 January 402, the anniversary of the accession of Honorius, and it would have been natural at that period for this to have followed on the baptism. Cf. H. Grégoire, "Quand est né l'empereur Théodose?" *Byzantion*, IV (1927-28), 347-8, and his and M. A. Kugener's translation of Mark's *Vie de Porphyre, évêque de Gaza* (Paris, 1930), p. xxxii. According to Theophanes (A.M. 5892; p. 76) the baptism was carried out by St. John Chrysostom, but Gennadius (*loc. cit.*) describes the young Theodosius as Severian's "son in baptism." It would be more natural for the bishop of the city to have performed the ceremony, but Severian seems to have preached the sermon on the occasion (*infra*, p. 224, note 24), which gave rise to Gennadius' error.

¹⁸ Because of this dating, I would now ascribe the consular coins and medallions to 583 rather than 602. On the evidence of these alone there is nothing to settle the matter, and I was inclined to favour 602 on the ground that there is consular bronze for 602 and none for 583 (*art. cit.*, pp. 60-61). But the gold and the bronze are not necessarily connected, since the one was made for personal distribution and the other was put into circulation by the mint in the same way as other coins, and the similarity of the consular coins and medallions to the Epiphany medallion is in favour of 583.

¹⁹ It should be said that the *De ceremoniis* is not very helpful regarding the ceremonial of imperial baptisms. The relevant chapter (II, 22; Bonn ed., I, 619-20) is very brief. There is more information regarding the ceremonies of the ten days following the birth of a Porphyrogenitus (II, 21, with acclamations in I, 42; pp. 615-9, 216-7).

²⁰ Constantine Porphyrogenitus, *De ceremoniis*, Preface (Bonn ed., I, 5).

Great, which must have been struck to celebrate the birth of her eldest son Constantine II in 312.²¹ It shows the Empress, nimbate, seated on a low-backed throne upon a dais; to either side of her are female personifications, one with a caduceus and the other with no recognizable symbol, each with one arm raised in a gesture of salutation; below are two or four genii, the number varying from one specimen to another. It is not likely that the figures on the Dumbarton Oaks medallion derive directly from those on the Fausta medallion, but they spring from the same iconographical tradition,²² and it is interesting to note the changed position of the hands on the supporting figures, who are now adoring not the Mother but the Son. One of the scenes below the figure of the Virgin, the Adoration of the Magi and the bringing of their gifts, had a definite parallel in the ceremonial surrounding the birth of a Porphyrogenitus, for on the eighth day after the child's birth the magistri, patricians, and all the chief officials of the court and city passed through the empress' bedroom, which had been specially hung for the occasion with cloth of gold, bringing their good wishes and filling the child's cradle with their gifts.²³

²¹ F. Gneecchi, *I medaglioni romani*, I (Milan, 1912), pl. 8, no. 10.

²² The figure of the Empress seated upright and directly facing the spectator is found on a number of issues of the fifth century, and is very distinctive; cf. the Ravenna medallion of Galla Placidia in Gneecchi pl. 20, 2, and the Ravenna solidi of Licinia Eudoxia. There is nothing quite corresponding to it on the coins of emperors, the nearest being the seated figure of the emperor on consular coins.

²³ Const. Porphy., *De ceremoniis*, II, 21 (Bonn ed., I, 618-9). John of Ephesus comments on the particular splendour of the gifts

The appositeness of the design on the reverse to the baptism of the Porphyrogenitus needs no emphasis, but there is one curious detail which shows how the baptisms of Christ and of an heir to the throne could be linked in people's minds. We possess a substantial fragment of a homily on the Epiphany attributed to Chrysostom in which allusion is made to Arcadius, emperor and consul, and to his son Theodosius who "is baptised" and with his father rules the world, and the preacher declares that Arcadius could appropriately say of the boy, in the words of the story of the Transfiguration (Mark 9:7): "This is my beloved Son; hear Him."²⁴ The Dumbarton Oaks medallion has for its legend the parallel verse from the story of the Baptism (Matt. 3:17): "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Divine and imperial authority were so closely linked at Byzantium that Maurice could have echoed either text without any consciousness of their possible incongruity at the baptism of his first-born son in 584.²⁵

which greeted the birth of Theodosius. Cf. also O. Treitinger, *Die oströmische Kaiser- und Reichsidee nach ihrer Gestaltung im höfischen Zeremoniell* (2nd ed., Darmstadt, 1956), p. 109, who notes the parallel between this gift-bringing and that of the Magi.

²⁴ A. Wenger, "Notes inédites sur les empereurs Théodose I, Arcadius, Théodose II, Léon I," *Revue des études byzantines*, X (1952), 51-4. The homily was delivered during the week following Epiphany in 402, possibly on the occasion of the coronation. It alludes to a previous homily by another preacher, i.e. Severian.

²⁵ I should like to express my thanks to Prof. Ernst Kitzinger for allowing me to discuss with him several of the topics dealt with in this paper, and to both him and Dr. Hans Belting for much advice and information on iconographical problems.